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Leakproof?

A United States ambassador tells us he never puts anything in a cable that he wouldn't mind seeing in public print. It's not exactly like the corporate executive who says he never conducts business that he wouldn't mind his children seeing on television. The secrecy of official cables is not automatically to conceal matters embarrassing to the government. It is to permit discussion of often delicate diplomatic subjects before conclusions are ready to be announced.

That is why the recent leaking of Ambassador Watson's messages from Moscow would have been outrageous even if the leaks had not apparently been selectively engineered to distort and discredit Senator Percy's long-known moderation on Mideast policy. And that is why it is to be hoped the Reagan team follows through on its criticism of leaking in respect to the Percy episode.

The whole problem of leaking flared during the campaign when Republicans raised the question of administration leaks of intelligence information for political purposes. It is a kind of rule of thumb to identify leaks with those who stand to benefit from them.

Earlier the White House was conducting its own inquiry into leaks on such matters as military aid to Morocco. It seems safe to say that there are better ways to stop leaking of this sort than to demand affidavits of innocence from men at the top such as national security adviser Brzezinski, CIA chief Turner, and then Secretary of State Vance. After State Department spokesman Hodding Carter left office, he reportedly said he had

refused to sign such an affidavit, "a presumptive statement that says I'm a good boy." He offered one reason for leaking:

"There are some people there [the White House], who are major leakers themselves, who think the only way reporters get a story is through a leak. They think reporters are clods and animals, and that you simply feed them."

Insofar as reporters fit that image, they may lend themselves to the motives of the leakers. However, the damming of leaks is not up to reporters but to those in the government responsible for maintaining legitimate secrecy. We were glad to hear Richard Allen, often mentioned as the next national security adviser, condemn the leaks of Ambassador Watson's cables in the strongest terms. To Hodding Carter the National Security Council had been responsible for the "most substantial leaks." If that was so in the past, Mr. Reagan has a chance to launch an administration that is leakproof, at least at the top.

We do not know who did the leaking of the Watson cables, but Reagan officials properly took the occasion to warn their transition associates, who had been given access to them. Among the important reasons cited for not leaking cables was the need for trust by foreign leaders that their conversations with Americans could be kept in confidence.

Mr. Reagan in office will be challenged to remember that the democratic goal should always be an open government with a minimum of secrets from the public it represents — and with the ability to preserve those secrets that are in the public interest.